

Dedicated to religious beliefs that opposed war and killing, young Mennonite draftees during World War I faced an onslaught of ridicule, abuse, and threats of death if they did not join the ranks of soldiers and fight for the American cause.



THE COST OF CON- SCIENCE PART 2

by Sara J. Keckeisen

HENRY'S STORY

Part 1 of "The Cost of Conscience" appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of *Kansas Heritage*.

Henry Coopridner and his Mennonite neighbors who boarded the train on a September day in 1918 were innocent Kansas farm boys. But they had been taught from childhood what the Bible said about war and peace, and as believers in Christ's teachings they were to "follow after the things which made for peace . . . without which no man shall see the Lord" (Romans 14:19; Hebrews 12:14). Now, as draftees in the U.S. Army and heading for Camp Funston, they were being asked to test that faith to the utmost.

Henry found himself journeying to Camp Funston not only with his fellow Mennonite conscriptees but with boys who were bound to be soldiers. The mixed company, with its accompanying cigarette smoke, passed flasks, and profanity, was his first taste of what was to come.

Camp Funston, a World War I training camp at Fort Riley, had been in operation for a year and a half before Henry arrived. Under the leadership of General Leonard Wood, the officers and men had been dealing with conscientious objectors for some time with little direction from their superiors in Washington. In a classic "Catch-22" situation, training camp commanders sent desperate messages to the War Department, pleading for information on how to deal with conscientious objectors, while the federal government was hoping the experiences in the camps would give them guidance in formulating government policy.

Army personnel were not trained in tolerance but rather in enforcing military discipline. Along with not understanding the pacifist point of view, General Wood and his fellow officers had a fundamental prejudice against those who



Henry Coopridner.

Although physical violence against the COs was forbidden, the prejudice they experienced in their camps. There were reports of kicks, stabs with a pen, vandalism with yellow paint, and humiliati

professed it. Their feelings about the Mennonites' "dense ignorance," "ignorance and stupidity," and "stolid indifference to those moral and political questions which were so profoundly stirring the minds and hearts of their fellow countrymen" were the unfortunate foundation on which they proceeded to deal with the pacifists in their midst.

When the Mennonite conscriptees initially arrived in camp, they received three instructions: they were to wear a uniform, perform service, and drill. Adding to the difficulties of the mili-

tary authorities was the range of acceptance that these rules found among the arriving Mennonite conscientious objectors. Not only were camp leaders not given directions on how to treat the COs, but the Mennonite leadership had not been able to give their departing boys absolute blueprints on what they should or should not do for fear of running afoul of the Sedition Laws. Young men from the more liberal wings of the Mennonite Church often did not find that wearing a uniform and accepting noncombatant work in the Fort Riley hospital or in the camp



Little, if any, understanding was given to the pacifist point of view, and most military officers harbored a prejudice against those who professed it. As can be detected in this cartoon (left), conscientious objectors in army camps found themselves at the mercy of frustrated commanders, who treated these individuals with intolerance and lack of respect. Given little direction on how to deal with COs, military leaders resorted to punishment tactics and physical violence, as is evident from these newspaper articles that appeared in the *Kansas City Star* on October 10, 1917 (lower left), and November 6, 1917 (facing page). Like many of the Mennonite draftees, Henry Coopridner refused to wear a military uniform and was issued instead a pair of "old and worn out" coveralls "torn down one leg." His appearance undoubtedly was similar to these Mennonite COs (facing page) photographed at Camp Funston in 1918.

MENNONITES IN ARMY BALK.
Fifteen Put in Guardhouse When They Refused to Do Any Work.
 CAMP FUNSTON, KAS., Oct. 10.—Fifteen members of the Mennonite sect were placed in the guardhouse here this afternoon for refusing to work, and three Mennonite ministers were driven from the reservation on a technical charge of being on government ground after their passes had expired. It is believed here the men held a meeting some place last night and were coached by someone who told them just what to do and say. The men were told yesterday they would be made a part of the utilities workmen here and would be put to work gathering and hauling

kitchen compromised their nonviolent beliefs. Those who were able to accept those kinds of roles usually were treated no differently than regular soldiers: they were allowed to live in the barracks and eat meals prepared in the camp kitchen, they received pay, were given furloughs, and were allowed to have visitors. Little, if any, harassment was encountered within the camp community.

However, the conscience of many Mennonite conscriptees would not permit them to participate in such noncombatant roles that appeared harmless. In their view, any activity supervised by the military was a military activity: any potatoes they peeled or horses they fed or rocks they hauled constituted an activity that freed other men to engage in fighting and killing others.

The only concrete directive that camp commanders such as General Wood received was that no disciplinary action could be taken against conscientious objectors. Frustrated commanders dealt with these recalcitrant farm boys by segregating them into

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detention areas within the camps and requiring of them only that they take care of their own beds, clothing, and any equipment they might have, help with camp clean-up, and provide sufficient military courtesy to avoid reprimands.

The conscientious objectors, however, soon came to be viewed as a potential threat to military discipline. General Wood felt strongly that the treatment given these “scoundrels” should not appear appealing in any way to the regular soldiers who shared the camp with them. Those who refused noncom-

ing to transfer water from one bucket to another with a spoon, or standing on one foot for an hour with the other foot tied up behind were some of the common forms of abuse, which one government official described as “good-natured hazing.” Before Camp Funston completed a stockade to house them, any COs who refused to help pick up trash were required to stand outside in any weather while others picked up trash, and the COs were limited to two meals a day. On October 14, 1917, five Mennonites who refused to haul trash on Sunday were struck repeatedly by the

BEAT FIVE CAMP OBJECTORS

FINES AND REPRIMAND FOR FUNSTON
FIGHTING “NON-COMS.”

**When Soldiers With Religious and
Conscientious Scruples Refused to
Work, Their Superiors in
Company Became Angry.**

(By a Staff Correspondent.)

CAMP FUNSTON, KAN., NOV. 6.—Five non-commissioned officers in the motor truck battalion have been tried by a summary court as a result of assaulting five conscientious objectors several days ago, it was learned here today. The men pleaded guilty and were ordered to be severely reprimanded. Seven days' pay will be withheld from each man.

All the conscientious objectors have been turned over to the department of sanitation for noncombatant work



Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives

batant service lived in soft-sided tents, even in winter, and were required to cook their own meals. Although they occasionally were permitted a visit by their pastors, they were not permitted to see their families. Constant pressure was applied to the Mennonite boys to explain their faith and to justify their convictions, with the hope that this grilling, coupled with segregation from their families, would encourage them to change their minds and join the patriotic cause.

Although physical violence against the COs was forbidden, the prejudice they had experienced in their communities also was very much present in the microcosm of the camps. There were reports of kicks, stabs with a pen, vandalism with yellow paint, and humiliations. In one camp two conscientious objectors were taken to the camp square and forced to read their Bibles over a period of several days while hundreds of men jeered. COs being forced to take cold showers, having their skin scrubbed with a wire brush or with lye, being assigned “exercises” such as holding a spoon at arm’s length for extended periods of time, hav-

soldiers assigned to confine them to quarters.

Despite the suffering, very few Mennonite conscientious objectors lost their belief in nonresistance and nonviolence. Their sincerity and refusal to back down forced the military establishment to define how far it could push these men and helped establish alternative means to keep the COs occupied. By the time Henry Coopridner arrived at Camp Funston in September 1918 the worst of the abusive situations had passed, although their legacy lingered on.

After debarking the train, Henry and the other young men were herded together to wait their turn to go through “the Mill,” where they would be examined and assigned a place in the camp. Immediately upon arrival, all new inductees were required to shower and surrender their own clothes. They were issued military uniforms, and although some conscientious objectors from more liberal wings of the Mennonite Church did accept the uniform, Henry, whose family was affiliated with the more conserv-

When Henry declared his belief in Christ's teachings about peace and value of human life, his interrogators attacked him with a barrage of swearing. Henry remembered that if ever a cussword was "spoken by the mouth

ative (Old) Mennonite conference, refused. He was issued instead a pair of "old and worn out" coveralls "that were torn down one leg." His own clothes, his blankets, and the few possessions he had brought along were stuffed in a barracks bag. Until he was called in for his first examination, Henry was required to stand for hours with the bag on his back and was given no permission to sit down or rest in any way. So his test began.

Over the course of the first two or three days each CO was called in and questioned by an officer to determine how far the

of human life, Henry's interrogators denigrated his convictions, accused him of base ignorance, and attacked him with a barrage of swearing. Henry remembered, "If ever there was a cussword that was ever spoken by the mouth of a human being, it was given to us, and we were called every name there is in the English language." In the time Henry was at Camp Funston he was threatened with death by firing squad and with harm being visited upon his family if he did not change his views.

Dismissed from this interrogation, a shaken Henry was as-

Upon refusing to participate in the war effort at Camp Funston, Henry and his fellow COs were assigned to live in a detention camp (top right) where they shared quarters in soft-sided tents, regardless of the weather, and they were situated next to men who were quarantined because of exposure to disease. Used to hard work, the Mennonites responded well to drill training and precision marches that they believed did not contribute to the war effort. Also photographed at Camp Funston in 1918 (lower right), these Mennonite men pause momentarily during an exercise march.

inductee would cooperate in the war effort. It was the expressed intent of the camp's military establishment to "work on" the COs, to probe in ways that were intended to make them question, and ultimately abandon, their nonresistance stand. Although careful by this time to avoid actual physical abuse, officers apparently had no limit to the psychological pressure they were allowed to apply against the men. Fielding questions about his voting record (if he had voted and helped put the government in office, how could he refuse now to support that government?), his religious beliefs, and when, or if, he had been baptized into the church, Henry faced a bitter challenge to his religious convictions. When he declared his belief in Christ's teachings about peace and the value



Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives



Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives

gators denigrated his convictions, accused him of base ignorance, and attacked th of a human being, it was given to us.”

signed to the detention area of Camp Funston. Sixty-two other conscientious objectors shared living quarters in this row of frame tents set on raised platforms, situated next to the quarters of men who were quarantined because of exposure to disease.

The conscientious objectors were assigned to the training battalion of the 164th Depot Brigade. Nearly every day Henry and his fellow COs were questioned about their beliefs and assigned tasks meant to test the limit of their scruples. These men were accustomed to working hard — idleness was as much anathema to

tasks meant to test the limit of their scruples. These men were accustomed to working hard — idleness was as much anathema to them as it was to their officers. They had no objections to the requirement of keeping their own living quarters clean or to obeying “drill” requirements (marching in precision, four abreast), or to saluting camp officers. They had no quarrel with daily exercise marches into the hilly areas around the camp. But once in the hills, the officer in charge would ask who was willing to gather rocks from the hills and carry them back to camp, to be

Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives



Marching into the hills around Camp Funston (top left), Mennonite COs were expected to gather rocks and carry them back to camp where they would be used to build roads. Initially, Henry agreed to perform this task, but upon realizing he was aiding in transporting weapons and vehicles of war, he refused to cooperate. COs unwilling to participate in military tasks were not permitted to eat in the camp mess, but were given unprepared food that they were required to prepare for themselves (lower left).

Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives

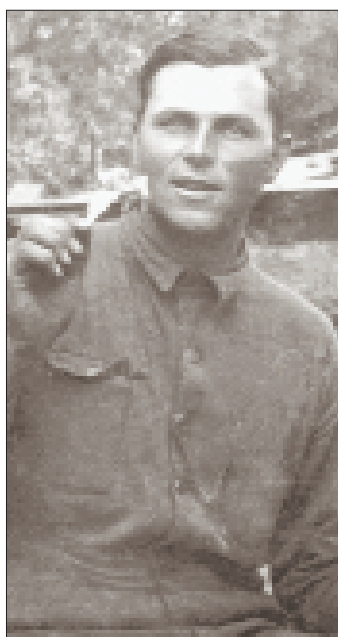


ground up for making roads. Some immediately refused to do so while others, Henry included, consented to carrying the rocks. Those who refused outright were taken back to camp, where they were again threatened with dire consequences and forced to take icy outdoor showers in the cold late fall weather.

Henry moved rocks for a time but eventually refused when it became apparent that if he cooperated with one task, he was asked to do more. For example, if he moved rocks to be crushed into gravel, then he should agree to spread the gravel to make a road—a road used to move weapons and vehicles of war. In addition, his labor would free other soldiers in camp to train to fight

The Mennonites' stand seemed to be borne out twenty years later when a new global conflict proved cy" but had fostered the seeds of even more destructive warfare.

in the war effort and should agree to fight. Henry joined the ranks of those who refused all cooperation, realizing that "some of those things we had to refuse because we saw it was just leading from one thing to another, a little bit more along the military activity or thing that had to be done for the military." Those who refused to cooperate were not permitted to eat in the mess but instead were given unprepared food—raw potatoes, tinned food, bits of meat—and required to prepare it themselves out in the hills where they took their daily exercise. These men also



Courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives

(Left) Henry Coopridner takes his meal out in the countryside at Camp Funston, where many Mennonite COs sometimes were forced to eat after they refused to aid in the war effort. (Right) Entitled "Conscientious Objector," this poem by acclaimed writer Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses the strong convictions of those who, though threatened and reviled, refused to forsake their belief in pacifism.

were not permitted to have any visitors. Although Henry's parents and brothers, and the pastor from his church, came to the camp several times during the months he was there, the detention camp inmates were treated as if they were quarantined. Henry's family was not permitted any closer than about 240 feet; they could just peer at him through binoculars and wave to him through the fence.

One morning late in October 1918 Henry woke up feeling feverish and found he was unable to stand to answer roll call. He was taken to the camp hospital with a temperature of 104 degrees—he had fallen victim to the Spanish influenza that was sweeping Camp Funston and the rest of the country.

The hospital was in one of the permanent buildings, and it was warm there, with a comfortable cot and nutritious food—things Henry had not experienced for some time. Here dozens of men were nursed for illness, and any differences in conscience were set aside by the medical staff tending to those so desperately sick. The boy in the bed next to Henry died, and Henry felt he was nearly ill enough to follow. After about ten days, howev-

were set aside by the medical staff tending to those so desperately sick. The boy in the bed next to Henry died, and Henry felt he was nearly ill enough to follow. After about ten days, however, he was on the mend and sent back to recuperate in the detention camp.

While in the hospital, Henry celebrated his twenty-second birthday. That day, November 11, at the eleventh hour, at the eleventh minute, the armistice was signed ending the war. The atmosphere at Camp Funston toward conscientious objectors

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.
I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.
He is in haste. . . .
But I will not hold the bridle while he cinches the girth.
And he may mount by himself: I will not give him a leg up.
Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the fox ran. . . .
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his pay-roll.
I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.
Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man's door.
Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to Death?
Brother, the passwords and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through me
Shall you be overcome.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

changed immediately. The regular grilling about beliefs, the verbal abuse they had incurred, the cold showers, and threats of execution stopped altogether. When the military authorities asked the COs to help dismantle the temporary tent quarters, Henry accepted the work gladly—since the war was over, this could not be considered aiding the war effort.

By the time Henry Coopridner was discharged from Camp Funston on December 29, 1918, he had faced some of the worst abuses of civil liberties that the federal government could exact on a United States citizen. He had had his family's honor and integrity vilified, his religious beliefs questioned and ridiculed, and his physical being threatened with death. Through it all Henry had found the fundamental strength of heart to cling to his belief in the evil of war and the necessity to refuse to participate in any manner in its waging. Before he left Camp Funston, Henry and his tent mates took up a collection to buy a Bible for their sergeant who had been their foremost persecutor during their time at the camp. When they pre-

that the Great War had not “made the world safe for democra-

sented him with the gift, the sergeant “broke down and wept.” Although the conscientious objectors did not receive any pay during the time they were at Camp Funston, when they were discharged they each received a check from the government for the time they had spent there. Henry’s group pooled their government money and donated it to a

take a more aggressive peace testimony out into that world. By the time World War II ignited, the Mennonite Church had set up the Mennonite Civilian Public Service program that provided alternate service opportunities in the fields of mental health care, improving living conditions in rural areas, and medical research.

The Coopriders family of McPherson County was just one of many Mennonite families who, because of its beliefs, endured great indignity and suffering during World War I. The Mennon-



relief fund, and in so doing did not profit in any way from the war.

The government’s experience with the conscientious objectors of World War I did help create a more equitable method of dealing with COs during subsequent conflicts. The Mennonite Church learned from the mob actions of local vigilante committees and from the abuse their number suffered in the training camps that it must better educate its members, through its churches, conferences, and colleges, to not only know the biblical basis for their beliefs but also to be prepared to participate in the modern secular world and to

Learning from the government’s treatment of conscientious objectors during World War I, the Mennonite Church continues to educate its members about the biblical basis for their beliefs and to provide them alternate service opportunities that will not break with their tenets of peace and nonviolence.

great indignity and suffering during World War I. The Mennonites’ stand—that war is evil and can never be the means to achieving peace—seemed to be borne out twenty years later when a new global conflict proved that the Great War had not “made the world safe for democracy” but had fostered the seeds of even more destructive warfare. The unhappy story of military destruction that continues in the twenty-first century seems to vindicate rather than discredit the nonresistant witness of the First World War. Although governments continue to quarrel and military battles continue to erupt and claim the lives of soldiers and innocent civilians, we can continue to work for peace and hope that wars will someday become a relic of the past.

War will exist until that distant day
when the conscientious objector
enjoys the same reputation and prestige
that the warrior does today.

—John F. Kennedy

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